

Military Order
of the
Loyal Legion
of the
 United States



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA



WAR PAPER 66.

Personal Recollections of Hood
in Tennessee.



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Personal Recollections of Hood in Tennessee.

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Personal Recollections of Hood in Tennessee.

In the fall of 1864 General Croxton's brigade of cavalry was constantly scouting through Middle Tennessee and Northern Alabama. The brigade was composed of the First Tennessee, Second Michigan, Eighth Iowa, and my regiment, the Fourth Kentucky Mounted Infantry. The hard work had been exhausting on men and horses but still harder work was before us. Hood's invasion of Tennessee at this time was a despairing effort to disclose one gleam of light in a cause which seemed hopelessly lost. He had been appointed to the command of the Army because Johnson had failed and he was expected to do something to check the tide of its adverse fortune. Among his first moves was to try the flanking tactics of Chancellorsville with disastrous results to his Army. Driven out of Atlanta, Hood's situation was really desperate and justified the resort to most any desperate measure that gave hope of a change for the better. He moved in a wide detour and attacked Sherman's supply line. In this he again failed and the situation was still more desperate. We then felt sure that we would soon have to grapple with him in Tennessee. My brigade had been through the Atlanta campaign and had been ordered back to Middle Tennessee, as stated, to look after roving bands of rebel cavalry. Late in September Forest invaded Tennessee with a large force of cavalry, and on the 27th we met him just south of Pulaski and fought him until dark. That night he withdrew and we followed him over half of Middle Tennessee and finally, October 8th, drove him over the Tennessee River below Florence.

Alabama. Under competent commanders we might have caught and virtually destroyed his force. We then scouted back toward Columbia and Pulaski, and Sunday, October 16th, moved from the latter place on the road to Florence, Alabama, as we had learned at this time that Hood was on the march to that vicinity. I was in the advance in command of the First Battalion of the regiment and met a force of the enemy face to face in the road. I charged at him and he turned and fled. My horses were so worn out with hard service that I could not catch him, and we had a running fight all the afternoon. At every favorable position he made a stand and I had to charge and drive him out. At a small village, Center Star, he made a stand as if he intended to contest my further advance. As we came in range a volley of musketry met us and a bullet struck the horse of my orderly at my side. I ordered an officer to take twenty-five men and make a quick detour through the woods to a road that came at right angles, to raise the yell, and charge, and I would meet him in the public square. A few minutes only were required for this move, and we were in the village and the enemy flying toward Florence. Some distance further on he made a stand in a good position behind some houses and stables across a small creek. The road ran down the bank and into the stream, which it followed around his position and up the bank and high ground beyond. As we came in range, the usual volley of musketry greeted us and a bullet went through my horse's ear. A charge along the road and up on the high ground beyond cut off his retreat, and his only chance of escape was to take to the thick woods, near by, into which nothing but a frightened rebel could penetrate, and we saw no more of him. The command then moved to the vicinity of Florence, Alabama, and for several days was scouting and

watching in that section. As expected, Hood appeared on the opposite bank of the Tennessee River, and on October 31st laid a pontoon bridge to an island in the river and threw a brigade over, who waded the shallow water on our side, and thus obtained a foothold near Florence and rapidly crossed his Army. After several days of skirmishing we retired across Shoal Creek, a rugged, rapid stream that empties into the Tennessee River above Florence. November 5th a large force of the enemy appeared on the opposite side and three regiments of our brigade were engaged in a brisk musketry fire across the creek, my regiment in reserve on the high ground above. The road at this point runs on the brink of a high, rugged bank of the creek and descends gradually down to the ford and bridge to the level of the banks beyond, where the fight was on. This road was the only way of escape for our forces in case of necessity. A lack of vigilance on the part of the commanding general came near disastrous results for us. A brave and heroic dash only saved the three regiments from capture. A division of the enemy had quietly crossed the creek down near the river, and was in our rear not two hundred yards away before discovered. My regiment mounted instantly and moved rapidly through a small open woods to an open field, some fifty yards wide, to thick woods beyond the fence, in which the enemy's line was advancing. As I came into the open with my command a furious volley of musketry opened on us from the enemy's line in the woods and a bullet broke my horse's thigh. In the face of this galling fire we had to form on right into line. The general galloped up at this moment and gave me the order to "dismount, charge, and drive those fellows out of the woods." The situation was serious and no time to consider, but I have since thought that an order to a small battalion of dismounted cavalry to drive

out a whole division of the enemy, massed in the woods, was somewhat amusing. The order to charge was promptly obeyed, and almost instantly, in a dash, we were at the fence and the enemy's line not fifty yards away. This was one of the places that I did not expect to get out of. I expected to be killed or captured. But the dash was so sudden and daring, and the fire from our carbines so furious, that it checked the enemy a little while and in the meantime the regiments engaged in the fight across the creek below had passed out on the road. I plainly heard the enemy's order "forward," and I gave the order to withdraw, and succeeded in bringing my battalion out. It was a close call, the enemy's line following right up to the road, and a soldier was killed in the road right under the feet of my horse that, somehow, I had caught and mounted. After the fight the enemy, having accomplished but little, retired across Shoal Creek, and our brigade again moved up to the same position, and continued to watch Hood's movements. That very day General Stanley took position at Pulaski, Tennessee, with his corps, when he should have done so at Lawrenceburg, which was on the direct road from Florence to Columbia. If Hood had crossed the river at Decatur, Alabama, then the station at Pulaski would have been all right but at Pulaski he could not and did not accomplish anything. General Schofield, in the meantime, having assumed command there. November 12th I went with a flag of truce to Shoal Creek. This was not of much importance, it was only a ruse to overlook the ground and see the best place to obstruct the road. The next night the regiment went down, drove the enemy away, and felled trees to blockade the road. Monday, November 21st, Hood began his move and we retired skirmishing in the direction of Lawrenceburg, and as we were fighting the enemy through the streets of that town Schofield was still holding on at

Pulaski, as far from Columbia as Lawrenceburg. It was then a race between them to reach Columbia, and Schofield barely got in first, when he should have been there two or three days before, and his trains all across Duck River and on the road to Franklin. Columbia was no place to make a stand, anyhow. The city and high ground are on the south side of Duck River, and a force defending it has the river behind to cross if pressed back, and the retreating force when across is on low ground, and the assailant has every advantage, besides the place is easily flanked above and below the town, as the sequel showed. November 25th our brigade crossed Duck River on the Franklin pike and bivouacked, Hood closely investing Columbia on the south. November 28th we moved off the pike to the right, up the river through fields and woods, and discovered Hood's Army crossing the river above Columbia, aiming to secure the road to Franklin. The danger to Schofield in Columbia was apparent and imminent. He faced impending destruction. It was a very disagreeable day, snowing and cold. Sometime during the night of the 28th we reached the Franklin and Lewisburg pike, formed line of battle across the road, bivouacked in the snow and cedars, to await the coming dawn and Forest's Cavalry, and they both came together. This was the morning of the 29th, and all day we were fighting in a death struggle holding the enemy back from Franklin and Schofield's line of retreat. At Mt. Carmel we found part of General Hatch's Cavalry well posted, and, with artillery, Rutherford's Creek and valley in front, and over which we had passed, the enemy following closely, came swarming and yelling out of the cedars beyond the valley like legions of wild Comanches. It was absolutely necessary to check the advance of Forest here. Our brigade was properly posted in line, my command on the extreme right along a yard and garden

fence at the head of a small valley that ran a hundred yards down to the bottom, where were a lot of buildings, behind which the enemy swarmed and from which furious volleys of musketry were kept up. The artillery opened and the fight was fierce now all along the line. During the battle some houses took fire in the village. The battle had driven the women and children into the houses and the fire drove them into the streets, producing a scene of wild commotion. The cheers and yells of the assaulting hosts, the counter-cheers of our own forces, the rattle of musketry, the thunders of artillery and exploding shells, the women and children running screaming through the streets, the hissing flames as they rolled in consuming fury, mountain high, made up a battle scene of pathetic but surpassing grandeur. Between my horses and a log house in the yard two little child tots were busy with their childish amusements, too young to realize their peril, and seemingly oblivious to the storm of battle that raged so savagely around them, the mother in the house too frightened to come to their rescue. Forest found that he could not dislodge us at this point; he ceased his attacks and moved off to Spring Hill, six miles west, and succeeded in capturing a few wagons near that place on the Columbia pike, some twelve miles in Schofield's rear and on his line of retreat. Our brigade hurried on to Franklin that night. Schofield, realizing his peril at Columbia, moved out, which he should have done the day before, and all that night of the 29th his trains and troops were moving in a thin line along the pike to Franklin, where he should have been twenty-four hours before, and his train two days before. Two whole corps of Hood's Army, and Forest's Cavalry, had crossed Duck River above Columbia the 28th, and on the night of the 29th were massed along the road near Spring Hill, in sight of Schofield's retreating line. Schofield's

position was perilous in the extreme. His thin retreating line stretched along the road for miles, encumbered by his trains and no part of his force in position to support any other part of his line if attacked. His escape borders on the marvelous. If Hood had attacked that night, success was in his grasp, and there is no reason why he should have failed. It was a situation in war that probably has no parallel, a retreating army in weary march all night along a road, in hailing distance of which, and in gunshot of which, the enemy was massed in overwhelming numbers. Hood claims that he ordered the attack to be made, but his subordinates do not seem to verify this claim. At any rate, the opportunity was in Hood's reach to win a signal victory and he let it slip away from him. The Confederate historian says that General Bate, about midnight of the 29th, spoke to General Hood about the conflict of orders and the failure to seize the road at Spring Hill and cut off the retreat of the enemy. Hood replied: "It makes no difference now, it is all right. General Forest informs me that he holds the turnpike north of Spring Hill and will stop the enemy if he tries to pass to Franklin. We will have a surrender in the morning without a fight. We can sleep quietly to-night." The truth is, Forest, as stated, had left us at Mt. Carmel and dashed into the road near Spring Hill and captured a few wagons, but his possession of the road was of short duration, for he was very soon driven out. The last of Schofield's forces reached Franklin about daylight on the morning of the 30th, our cavalry still holding Forest back on the Lewisburg pike. Schofield had held on so long at Columbia that he could not bring away his pontoons and had to destroy them, and he had made no provision for crossing Harpeth River at Franklin, and bridges had to be then improvised that morning.

In a hand-to-hand struggle our cavalry held Forest back from the plain south of Franklin until Hood's infantry came up. As the line of infantry advanced, we crossed Harpeth River at McGavick's Ford, above Franklin, to the high ground on the north side and overlooking the plain south, over which Hood's Army was moving to the attack. The river here makes a sharp bend to the north, and leaves Franklin in a plain extending south, with here and there a few small knolls. The high ground is on the north side of the river, and occasionally assumed the dignity of a bluff. Where we crossed the river the bluff is much higher and overlooked the country south. I was ordered to take position along this bluff, behind a fence, from which place I could see the advance of the rebel army. About three o'clock in the afternoon his lines moved to the attack, and the battle of Franklin was on and in desperation. As a French historian has said of the great battle of Borodino, Franklin, on our part, was a battle without a plan and without a general. Hood, no doubt, chagrined at his failure the night before, staked the success of his campaign on this battle, and for five or six hours, and long into the night, the fighting was terrific and desperate. Hood had his whole army in hand, more than forty thousand men, and he could have, and no reason why he should not, bring at least thirty thousand men into action, and his assaults were brave, gallant, daring, desperate, savage. Nothing but the bold, unyielding determination of the line officers and men saved our forces from disastrous defeat. They repulsed assault after assault and wave upon wave of the oncoming foe, who seemed to assail with contempt of danger and death, and for six hours few battles can show more desperate fighting. All this time General Wilson, with our cavalry, was on the north side of the river watching Forest above, and on the Lewisburg pike.

But Forest crossed higher up, and bore down upon us attempting to reach the Nashville pike north of Franklin. There was danger for us in this move, and it had to be checked at any cost, and like a thunderbolt we dashed at him, and in half an hour there was not a rebel soldier on the north side of the river. We gave him such a complete whipping that it was noted in our command that he did not venture to attack us again during the next two days. Hood's failure was disastrous, and he lost nearly six thousand of his best soldiers, with thirteen general officers. This defeat took the fight out of his army. Every soldier of our army who did his duty at the battle of Franklin, November 30th, 1864, deserves more from his country than he has ever received. The vast consequences of an overwhelming victory for Hood there is a matter into which this paper does not enter. It might have been far-reaching. That night our infantry quietly withdrew to Nashville, my brigade, still scouting the country east, passed through the picket lines around Nashville on the Nolinsville pike about two o'clock on the morning of the 3d of December. Hood followed and invested the city and fortified his position. But he now faced a master on the field of battle, Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas. For two weeks the weather was detestable, mean, cold, and snow. December 15, 1864, dawned somewhat better. The whole scene changed. Hood was now on the defensive, and Thomas the master of the assaulting line. It was a scene to be remembered. The cavalry moved to the attack on the enemy's extreme left, stormed and took the works, and captured prisoners and artillery. The battle of Nashville was on. Thomas' line gradually moved forward and occupied favorable positions. Battery after battery got into place and opened on the enemy's works. Along in the afternoon I was fortunate to be so situated that I could see more than a mile

of the enemy's works and the line of battle. A dark cloud hung over the combatants, and the order to assault passed along the line which rose, and, with a cheer, started on the double quick. The artillery elevated their pieces and threw the missiles over the heads of the charging column, and the flash of exploding shells in that dark cloud presented a pyrotechnic display of singular beauty. Our forces mounted the enemy's works and, when the breach was made, the whole rebel line lifted, as far as I could see, and fled in confusion. It was a charge and a battle scene of tragic splendor that can not fade from the memory. Tragic, because many of the gallant boys who started never reached the enemy's works. They dropped from the ranks to rise and fight no more. That was the dark side and sad feature of the triumph. This was along the Hillsboro and the Granny White pikes. Night closed the strife. Next morning the attack was renewed all along the line, and our forces captured nearly everything—prisoners and artillery as they went—and the last I saw of the enemy that day he was flying in retreat through the Brentwood hills, beaten and his army destroyed. He was driven back across the Tennessee River, and Hood's Army, as a distinct organization, disappeared from history. General Thomas thus gave the death-blow to the rebellion in that part of the country, and had he a master like the great Napoleon he would have been exalted in rank, and would be known in history as the "Prince of the Cumberland."

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